

## Graduate Student Success



# GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION PLANNER

Essential Strategies and Insights for a Successful Application Journey

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Disclaimer: This guide is intended to provide general advice and guidance. Specific requirements and procedures may vary among institutions. Please consult the individual programs and institutions for the most accurate and up-to-date information.



## GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION PLANNER

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## A PLANNING GUIDE FOR YOUR APPLICATION TO GRADUATE SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

Hello, brave and ambitious graduate school applicant! Securing a spot in graduate school isn't for the faint of heart, so we've stepped up to help you improve your chances for acceptance. Following the steps in this guide will help you make sure you don't leave anything out of your applications and make the most of your preparation time.

Having an organized approach to the graduate school application process can be the difference between acceptance or denial. Many prospective students underestimate the time it takes to properly compose an application to graduate school and find themselves rushing at the last minute to complete the necessary components. This reduces their chance of being accepted and can even cause them to delay their submission for a whole application cycle.

Fret not, however! We've developed this graduate school application planning guide to lead you on your journey to graduate school acceptance. From start to finish, step by step, we will support you from the moment you decide to apply to the moment you collapse in happy satisfaction after having clicked the final submission button.

This planning guide covers all three phases of applying to graduate school: preparing for the process, developing the application materials, and submitting the application. We don't take it for granted that anyone has informed you about the inner workings of graduate school applications, and we provide invaluable information for applicants at any level. We've detailed tools and methods that have worked for us to optimize the application process - right down to how we organize our files. However, because we cannot anticipate the needs and requirements of every applicant or program, it is important that you carefully review the information and application guidelines specific to your programs of interest and use your best judgment when applying.

Graduate school with mystifying and confusing processes, but with the right guidance, we know you can succeed! So, don't let the jargon and the application components overwhelm you. Use this guide to conquer the graduate school application process so that you can join the next generation of scientists, writers, educators, economists, healthcare providers, and more. We are excited to have you with us!

# 1. PREPARING TO APPLY

## 1.1 ORGANIZATION

Start preparing for your application by creating an organizational structure for sorting and completing the different application components and materials. Doing this from the start will help you stay organized and efficient throughout the entire process. Staying organized will help you keep track of application requirements, reduce the time spent finding the materials you need, and help you maintain version control (i.e., always working in the right file).

Being new to the application process, you might not be certain where to start with an organizational structure, so we've provided Table 1 as an example of what has worked for us.

TABLE 1. EXAMPLE OF DOCUMENT ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

| Top Folder                                                                                         | Subfolder Level 1                                                                                                      | Subfolder Level 2                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  Grad School Apps | Standardized Tests                                                                                                     |  All files related to standardized testing <sup>1</sup> |
|                                                                                                    |  Work Sample <sup>2</sup>             |  Archive <sup>3</sup>                                   |
|                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                        |  LastName_writing_sample_v# <sup>4</sup>                |
|                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                        |  Miscellaneous writing sample documents                |
|                                                                                                    |  Personal Statement <sup>5</sup>    | <i>Follow the same folder/file structure as above.</i> <sup>6</sup>                                                                      |
|                                                                                                    |  Curriculum Vitae (CV) <sup>7</sup> | <i>Follow the same folder/file structure as above.</i> <sup>8</sup>                                                                      |
|                                                                                                    |  Recommendation Letters             |  RecommenderName <sup>9</sup>                         |
|                                                                                                    |  Administration                     |  UniversityName_Dec15 <sup>10</sup>                   |
|                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                        |  Application Planner                                  |
|                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                        |  Miscellaneous documents                              |

<sup>1</sup> Create a subfolder for each exam type as needed (GRE, GMAT, TOEFL, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> Some programs require a portfolio of demonstrating prior artistic work or a writing sample.

<sup>3</sup> Archive folders hold all old drafts of that folder's documents.

<sup>4</sup> Document draft with your last name, the document title, and the current version number. For university specific documents, you will create a base version and then create a copy of that version and rename for each university prior to tailoring the content.

<sup>5</sup> Some programs require a personal statement, statement of purpose, a research statement, or any combination thereof. When more than one is required, create a folder for each type, mirroring the structure of the personal statement folder.

<sup>6</sup> Follow the general structure for the Writing Sample folder, changing the document name as appropriate.

<sup>7</sup> Or resume.

<sup>8</sup> Follow the general structure for the Writing Sample folder, changing the document name as appropriate.

<sup>9</sup> Create one folder for each recommendation.

<sup>10</sup> Create a subfolder with the university name and its application deadline. Any university specific documentation and your final submission files belong in this folder.

## 1.2 APPLICATION PROFILES

Create your online application profile for each school you want to apply to, as soon as the application period has opened. Occasionally, there are discrepancies between what is described on the program admissions website and what is required in the actual application portal. Creating a profile early helps verify which materials are required by each program of interest, and any optional materials not listed on their website. If an application portal is not yet open, write a reminder in your calendar to create the profile as soon as possible. If there is no indication of when the portal will open, put a reminder in your calendar to check weekly.

## 1.3 DEADLINES AND REQUIREMENTS

After you have created as many of your online profiles as possible, it is time to start identifying the deadlines and application requirements for each program. As with much in higher education, there is no standardization of terms or processes for any given field or degree. Be prepared for variations in the language used and components required by different programs. Throughout this planning guide, we will define relevant terms and discuss general expectations for each of the components you are likely to find in a graduate school application. For now, just identify the application deadlines and component requirements for your programs of interest.

Remember, sometimes there are discrepancies between what is noted on a program admissions website and what is asked for in the online application portal. If this occurs, you can contact the program's admissions office and ask for clarification, but when in doubt, follow the online application instructions.

Additionally, if an online application allows you to include optional documents, it is almost always in your best interest to do so. For example, if an application requires a research statement and offers the option to submit a personal statement also, not including a personal statement will likely work against you. The exception to this would be when optional materials cast you in a poor light (e.g., bad exam scores).

We have created a table on the next page to help you track your application components. It includes the most common application components required by graduate schools in the United States. Feel free to print additional copies of the page if needed and be sure to list any optional or additional materials required by each program.

TABLE 2. APPLICATION COMPONENT TRACKER

|                                                 |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| University:                                     |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
| Deadline:                                       |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
| Application Components:                         |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
| Standardized Exams <sup>11</sup>                | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    |
| English Language Proficiency Exam <sup>12</sup> | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    |
| CV or Resume?                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> CV <input type="checkbox"/> Resume | <input type="checkbox"/> CV <input type="checkbox"/> Resume | <input type="checkbox"/> CV <input type="checkbox"/> Resume | <input type="checkbox"/> CV <input type="checkbox"/> Resume |
| Transcripts                                     | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    |
| Work Sample <sup>13</sup> Length:               | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    |
| Link to guidelines:                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
| Personal Statement <sup>14,15</sup> Length:     | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    |
| Link to guidelines:                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
| Research Statement <sup>13,14</sup> Length:     | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    |
| Link to guidelines:                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
| Statement of Purpose <sup>13,14</sup> Length:   | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    |
| Link to guidelines:                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
| Financial Aid Deadline Date:                    |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
| Documentation Needed:                           |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |
| Miscellaneous Requirements <sup>16</sup> Type:  | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>                                    |
| Link to guidelines:                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |                                                             |

<sup>11</sup> GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, Etc.

<sup>12</sup> Usually required for international students when English is not their native language.

<sup>13</sup> Work samples often include: writing samples, art portfolios, etc. Not all programs require a work sample. Check off if a work sample is required, write down any length requirements, and add a direct link to the online instructions.

<sup>14</sup> Programs usually require one or more of the following: personal statement, research statement, or statement of purpose. The differences between these documents are discussed in section 2.4.

<sup>15</sup> Check off if this document is required, write down any length requirements, and add a direct link to the online instructions.

<sup>16</sup> Some additional materials might include diversity statements, fee waivers, financial aid applications, cover letters, etc. Write down what additional materials you need and link to the guidelines for those materials.

2. COMPLETING YOUR APPLICATION

2.1 APPLICATION OVERVIEW

Now that you know your application deadlines and the components you will need for each program, it is time to create a plan to complete your materials.

Table 3 contains a visual overview of the order of preparation we recommended for each component. We have listed these subsections in the order that *most* students will want to follow and to provide a sense of which components will require the most preparation. The amount of time you need to complete each application component will vary based on your specific circumstances.

TABLE 3. GENERAL APPLICATION PROCESS OVERVIEW

|                                           |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|-------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Standardized Exam Preparation             | • | • | • | • | • | • |   |   |   |
| Work Sample                               | • | • | • | • | • |   |   |   |   |
| CV/Resume                                 | • |   |   |   | • |   |   |   |   |
| Contact Prospective Advisors <sup>1</sup> | • |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Personal Statement                        |   |   |   |   |   |   | • | • | • |
| Research Statement                        |   |   |   |   |   |   | • | • | • |
| Statement of Purpose                      |   |   |   |   |   |   | • | • | • |
| Transcripts                               |   |   |   |   |   |   | • |   |   |
| Financial Aid Application                 |   |   |   |   |   |   | • |   |   |
| Letters of Recommendation                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | • | • |
| Apply                                     |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | • | • |

<sup>1</sup>Research oriented doctoral applicants only

2.2 STANDARDIZED TESTING

TESTING OVERVIEW

Many universities require standardized test scores to be submitted as part of the graduate school application. Common standardized tests include the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT), and the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). It is very unusual for a university to require more than one exam except in the case of subject-specific GRE exams (mathematics, physics, and psychology), where general and subject-specific test scores may be required.

In addition to the exams noted, international students with undergraduate degrees from non-English speaking universities may also need to complete an English language fluency exam. The two most common are the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Admissions experts strongly recommend students practice for these exams regardless of their fluency to ensure familiarity with the question formats and expectations.

TEST PREPARATION

Preparing for these exams can be demanding, and the timeline for proper preparation will depend on your baseline knowledge and competing time demands. Calculating an optimal study schedule can be daunting, but worry not! We’ve created the table below to help you determine the best timeline for you.

Table 4 provides three timelines. A relaxed timeline that allows for two opportunities to retake the exam (three exams total), a moderate timeline that allows for one exam retake, and a tight timeline assuming no retakes.

To use this table, pick a timeline that best suits your needs and deadlines. Then, calculate the latest date you should take the exam by subtracting the number of weeks in your timeline from the date of your earliest application deadline. Please note that some exams are only given (or scored) a few times a year, so check exam schedules to ensure one is available before your latest exam date.

Finally, decide when to start studying for your exam. Do this by taking the study time indicated in Table 4 for your specific test/timeline and subtracting it from the latest exam date

| Timeline Example                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sam needs to take the GRE and decides to follow the moderate timeline in Table 4. This gives Sam 12 weeks to take the exam, study more if needed, retake the exam, and report his scores before a given deadline. |
| If Sam’s earliest application deadline is December 1 <sup>st</sup> , the latest date he should take the exam is around September 8 <sup>th</sup> .                                                                |
| The recommended preparation time for the GRE is 10 hours a week for 12 weeks. Sam should start studying around the first week of June to optimize his chances of getting a high score.                            |

you calculated before. This will give you an estimated start date for exam preparations. Pay particular attention to the table footnotes for the assumptions made in suggested timelines and test-specific information.

**TABLE 4. STANDARDIZED EXAM PREPARATION SCHEDULE<sup>17</sup>**

| Admissions Exams                                       | Study Time <sup>19</sup>                            | Timeline <sup>18</sup><br>[from application deadline] |                         |                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
|                                                        |                                                     | Relaxed <sup>20</sup>                                 | Moderate <sup>21</sup>  | Tight <sup>22</sup>    |
| <b>GRE, General</b>                                    | -12 weeks [120 hrs., 10 hrs. per week]              | -17 weeks                                             | -12 weeks               | -8 weeks               |
| <b>GRE, Subject<sup>23</sup></b>                       | -8 weeks [80 hrs., 10 hrs., per week] <sup>24</sup> | n/a <sup>25</sup>                                     | n/a <sup>24</sup>       | -6 weeks               |
| <b>GMAT</b>                                            | -5 weeks [50 hrs., 10 hrs., per week]               | -13 weeks                                             | -9 weeks                | -5 weeks               |
| <b>LSAT<sup>26</sup></b>                               | -12 weeks [240 hrs., 20 hrs. per week]              | n/a <sup>24</sup>                                     | n/a <sup>24</sup>       | n/a <sup>27</sup>      |
| <b>MCAT<sup>28</sup></b>                               | -12 weeks [240 hrs., 20 hrs. per week]              | -19 weeks <sup>29</sup>                               | -12 weeks <sup>30</sup> | -5 weeks <sup>31</sup> |
| <b>English Language Proficiency Exams<sup>32</sup></b> |                                                     |                                                       |                         |                        |
| <b>TOEFL</b>                                           | - 12 weeks <sup>33</sup>                            | -16 weeks                                             | -8 weeks                | -4 weeks               |
| <b>IELTS</b>                                           | - 12 weeks                                          | -20 weeks                                             | -8 weeks                | -4 weeks               |

<sup>17</sup> This table was last updated in March 2024. Please check exam provider's websites to note any changes.

<sup>18</sup> Timelines include the time it takes for scoring and result reporting to universities based on the exam provider's recommendations for using the **longest** reporting time. Actual reporting times may vary based on reporting type (electronic vs. paper) and delivery method. The timeline is the number of weeks before your application deadline that you must take the exam. Exam registration is usually earlier.

<sup>19</sup> Preparation times for exams are based on exam provider's estimates and student surveys. You may need more or less time based on baseline knowledge and other factors.

<sup>20</sup> Assumes 2 retakes, incorporates the mandatory wait time plus 2 weeks. Does not include time to receive exam scores unless otherwise noted (i.e., assumes you will know from the test-taking experience if you will want to retake the exam).

<sup>21</sup> Assumes 1 retake, incorporates the mandatory wait time plus 1 week. Does not include time to receive exam scores unless otherwise noted (i.e., assumes you will know from the test-taking experience if you will want to retake the exam).

<sup>22</sup> Assumes no retakes.

<sup>23</sup> Scores are made available three times a year.

<sup>24</sup> Average study time for the subject exams varies by the subject matter, be sure to adjust accordingly.

<sup>25</sup> Because scores are reported only a few times a year, relaxed and moderate timelines cannot be calculated.

<sup>26</sup> Exam offered 4 times a year.

<sup>27</sup> Scores for all tests within a month are released about 2 weeks after the last exam of the month. See the exam provider's website for testing and retesting deadlines.

<sup>28</sup> Testing is offered on frequent but fixed test dates. See the exam provider's website for testing deadlines.

<sup>29</sup> Because testing is offered on fixed test dates, the relaxed testing schedule includes the amount of time it will take to receive scores plus 2 weeks to meet the 10-day scheduling deadline for each retake. See the exam provider's website for testing registration deadlines.

<sup>30</sup> Because testing is offered on fixed test dates, the relaxed testing schedule includes the amount of time it will take to receive scores plus 2 weeks to meet the 10-day scheduling deadline for a retake. See the exam provider's website for testing registration deadlines.

<sup>31</sup> Scores are released on specific dates, approximately 35 days after the test date. See the exam provider's website for testing registration deadlines.

<sup>32</sup> Timelines are based on application to a university in the United States using electronic testing and score submission.

<sup>33</sup> Hours estimates are unavailable for English language proficiency tests. Estimates are based on survey responses that indicate students spend between 2 and 3 months preparing for the exams.

## TESTING ACCOMMODATIONS

Students who need disability accommodations will need to allow for time to get the necessary approvals. Application for and approval of accommodations requests are required before scheduling the GRE, the GMAT, or the MCAT, and at the registration deadline for the LSAT.

There are three considerations when determining a timeline for requesting accommodations: gathering the documentation and filling out the application, request processing time, and time needed to appeal the decision or respond to additional documentation requests.

We have created three timelines for planning for accommodations. The tight timeline assumes that you have the necessary documentation ready and will not need to appeal or provide additional documentation. The moderate timeline assumes you have the documentation ready but want time to appeal if needed. The relaxed timeline assumes that you need to gather the necessary documentation and may need to be adjusted for slow documentation provider responses.

TABLE 5. ACCOMMODATIONS SCHEDULE<sup>34</sup>

|                     | Processing Time                              | Timeline<br>[from exam registration date <sup>35</sup> ] |                        |                     |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
|                     |                                              | Relaxed <sup>36</sup>                                    | Moderate <sup>37</sup> | Tight <sup>38</sup> |
| GRE Accommodations  | 6 weeks                                      | -22 weeks                                                | -15 weeks              | -7 weeks            |
| GMAT Accommodations | 4 weeks                                      | -18 weeks                                                | -11 weeks              | -5 weeks            |
| LSAT Accommodations | Before registration deadline <sup>39</sup>   | -8 weeks                                                 | n/a <sup>40</sup>      | -1 week             |
| MCAT Accommodations | 60 days initial processing<br>30 days appeal | -22 weeks                                                | -15 weeks              | -10 weeks           |

## STANDARDIZED TESTING FEE WAIVERS

Most standardized test providers offer fee waivers or fee reductions under certain circumstances. Obtaining these reductions or waivers generally involves submitting a request with the relevant documentation, waiting for the request to be processed, and applying a waiver/reduction code to your account when registering for the exam. You should check the waiver requirements at least 6 weeks before your exam registration date to have enough time to complete the waiver application.

<sup>34</sup> TOEFL and IELTS testing accommodation procedures vary by testing location. Please see the test provider's website for details.

<sup>35</sup> Most testing accommodations must be approved before scheduling the exam or by the final registration deadline. Check the test provider's website for specific instructions.

<sup>36</sup> Includes 2 months to gather documentation; processing time; 2 weeks to complete an appeal, and appeal processing time.

<sup>37</sup> Includes 1 week to complete application; processing time; 2 weeks to complete an appeal, and appeal processing time.

<sup>38</sup> Includes 1 week to complete application and application processing time.

<sup>39</sup> Application is due before the final registration deadline. Processing time is not specified due to fixed testing dates.

<sup>40</sup> Not applicable due to fixed testing dates.

2.3 WORK SAMPLE

Work samples are demonstrations of your skills in an applied area, like an art portfolio or writing sample. Work samples are not always required for graduate school applications, but when they are, they weigh heavily in admissions decisions. Because of the variation in program requirements, there is no way to produce an average timeline. Many individuals may have examples of their work from their undergraduate studies or professional work, but others may have to start from nothing. Because of its importance and the length of time that it may take to create, it is essential to start this application component early. Table 6 provides a process for estimating the start time for completing required work samples.

TABLE 6. ESTIMATING WORK SAMPLE COMPLETION TIMES

|                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Step 1. Identify the program requirements for work samples.                                                                                                  |
| Step 2. Gather existing materials.                                                                                                                           |
| Step 3. Identify gaps or areas for improvement.                                                                                                              |
| Step 4. Estimate the hours of work it will take to complete the work sample by estimating the time it takes to complete the components. <sup>41</sup>        |
| Step 5. Determine how many hours you can spend per week working on the project.                                                                              |
| Step 6. Divide the hours needed to finish the work sample by the number of hours you can put in per week.                                                    |
| Step 7. Add four to your total from Step 6. <sup>42</sup>                                                                                                    |
| Step 8. Count back from your earliest application deadline the number of weeks from Step 7. That is the latest you should start working on your work sample. |

Timeline Example

Alex needs to produce an academic writing sample for their application. The guidelines specify a length of 10 to 20 pages.

Alex estimates it will take 20 hours to consider a topic and do a background literature review and 1 hour per page to write the first draft. Aiming for the guideline’s midpoint, they estimate a length of 15 pages [15 hours]. They then estimate that the first round of editing will also take 1 hour per page [15 hours]. Considering their writing experience, Alex decides they will need two more rounds of editing, with each taking 30 minutes per page [15 hours]. After adding up the estimates for each task, Alex determines they need a total of 65 hours for the writing sample.

Alex can regularly afford 5 hours a week to work on the writing sample, so 65 hours at 5 hours a week means they will need 13 weeks for completion.

Ideally, Alex will finish early enough to provide the sample to their letter writers, so they should need start their paper 17 weeks before their earliest application deadline.

<sup>41</sup> Time estimates are more accurate when applied to smaller tasks. For example, if you need 10 photographs, estimate how long one takes to complete and multiply it by 10. If you need a writing sample, estimate how long it will take you to write a page or a section and multiply it by the number of pages or sections needed. If you don’t have guidelines for the length or scope of a work sample from the university, search online for the average length of a portfolio/academic writing sample/creative writing sample, etc.

<sup>42</sup> Why four? Because that is when you will be giving your letter of recommendation writers the packet that they will and if you want them to have the quality of your work fresh in their minds, it is helpful to provide a sample.

## 2.4 CURRICULUM VITAE OR RESUME

Almost all graduate schools require a curriculum vitae (CV) or resume for their applications. In some parts of the world, these two words are used synonymously. However, in the United States the two documents have different standards.

CVs show in-depth information on training and experience. They include details on employment, academic training, publications and presentations, teaching experience, committee experience, and more. There is no standard page length for CVs. Resumes, however, are focused only on skills and experience relevant to a specific job and should be no longer than two pages. CVs are more common in academia, so you are more likely to have this requirement.

Notice that in Table 3, we have different recommendations for when graduate students start preparing their CVs or resumes. Graduate students who will be contacting prospective advisors before applying to graduate school (see Section 2.5), will want to have a copy of their CV available should the prospective advisor request it. Students who do not need to contact prospective advisors can begin creating their CVs or resumes later in the process but before beginning their application statements (Section 2.6). Assembling your CV or resume is a good starting place for writing your application statements as you consider your past experiences and their relevance to your career path. Finally, you should provide your references with a copy of your CV or resume to get the strongest recommendation letters possible.

## 2.5 PROSPECTIVE ADVISORS [Doctoral applicants]

Doctoral applicants applying to research-focused programs have an additional consideration as part of their application process. As funding is limited, alignment with ongoing faculty research is a high priority. Many graduate schools advise applicants to contact prospective faculty advisors before applying to the program. This allows the applicant to get acquainted with the faculty member and to identify funding opportunities within that research lab.

If you are applying to a research-oriented program, review the university's website carefully. Unless you are prohibited from contacting prospective advisors, you should strongly consider completing this step. Spend two to four weeks reading the most recent research by faculty members that you are interested in working with, then email them about your interests in their research and applying to the program. There are no specific guidelines for when to contact prospective faculty advisors, but the summer before applying is generally recommended. You can use the template in Table 7 to keep track of your faculty contacts.

**TABLE 7. FACULTY CONTACT TRACKING TEMPLATE**

|                                                    | University 1 <sup>43</sup> |           | University 2 |           |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
|                                                    | Faculty 1 <sup>44</sup>    | Faculty 2 | Faculty 1    | Faculty 2 |
| Email <sup>45</sup>                                |                            |           |              |           |
| Citation <sup>46</sup>                             |                            |           |              |           |
| Citation 1 Link                                    |                            |           |              |           |
| Citation 1 Summary <sup>47</sup>                   |                            |           |              |           |
| Citation 1 Questions <sup>48</sup>                 |                            |           |              |           |
| Citation 2                                         |                            |           |              |           |
| Citation 2 Link                                    |                            |           |              |           |
| Citation 2 Summary                                 |                            |           |              |           |
| Citation 2 Questions                               |                            |           |              |           |
| Citation... <sup>49</sup>                          |                            |           |              |           |
| Frequent coauthors <sup>50</sup>                   |                            |           |              |           |
| Date 1 <sup>st</sup> contact attempt <sup>51</sup> |                            |           |              |           |
| Response Date                                      |                            |           |              |           |
| Follow-up Date <sup>52</sup>                       |                            |           |              |           |
| Notes <sup>53</sup>                                |                            |           |              |           |

<sup>43</sup> Replace column headers with university names.

<sup>44</sup> Replace column headers with faculty names.

<sup>45</sup> If emails are not available on the university webpage, you may be able to locate contact information from the corresponding author section of one of the faculty's publications or on professional networking sites (e.g., LinkedIn or Research Gate).

<sup>46</sup> Never contact a prospective faculty advisor without reading their research first. Prioritize recent citations for which the faculty member was the lead author.

<sup>47</sup> Generate a summary to help you remember which publication was which (researchers often have multiple publications about the same general topic).

<sup>48</sup> Consider several questions you have about the publication; this will help you think of details to include in your email when you contact the prospective faculty member. Your email should demonstrate familiarity with the faculty member's work.

<sup>49</sup> 4 to 5 publications are ideal.

<sup>50</sup> Note other people the faculty member frequently collaborates with by checking for frequently appearing co-authors.

<sup>51</sup> Keep track of all contact dates and dates of responses

<sup>52</sup> Faculty are busy people, do not assume if you don't hear back the first time that the faculty member is uninterested. Follow-up after about 2 weeks of initial contact if you do not hear back. If you still do not hear back after 2 contact attempts, do not follow up further.

<sup>53</sup> Write down any relevant details about the faculty member or about applying to the program that come up in correspondence.

## 2.6 ADMISSIONS STATEMENTS

Personal, research, purpose, oh my! So many terms, so little standardization. If you struggle to differentiate between these seemingly synonymous statement types, you're not alone. As is the case for many academic terms, there is no official rule or expectation for how these terms are used. There are, however, some general guidelines for the differing statement types and many universities will post their specific expectations on their website. In the absence of university guidelines (those instructions override all others), you can use the following widely accepted widely accepted guidelines:

### ***PERSONAL STATEMENT***

A personal statement is a 1- to 3-page document that describes your background and goals from a personal perspective. It covers the experiences that led you to apply to graduate school, how they have prepared you to apply, and how the program you are applying to will lead you to your ultimate career goals. Although all three types of statements include information on your experience, current perspective, and future ambitions, the personal experience weighs your background higher than the other two. The personal statement allows the admissions committee to assess your dedication and commitment to the field and personal fit within the program and its faculty.

### ***RESEARCH STATEMENT***

A research statement is also 1 to 3 pages but is more formal and skills-oriented. It focuses on your professional and academic experience, technical preparation, research interests, and your ultimate career goals. The research statement allows the admissions committee to evaluate you for your preparation and commitment to graduate school, the professional fit of your research interests to faculty interests and experience, and your potential to contribute to your field.

### ***STATEMENT OF PURPOSE***

A statement of purpose is 1 to 3 pages and is a combination of personal and research statements. It is formal, like a research statement, but can include more personally relevant details. It focuses primarily on your preparation for graduate school, your career goals, and how well the graduate program is suited to help you meet these goals.

Preparing your statements should start two to three months before your application deadline. These statements are weighed heavily in admissions decisions, and you want to give yourself time to brainstorm, write, and rewrite them repeatedly. When planning your schedule for completing these statements, aim to have a good draft completed in time to give it to your references. The details and framing of your statements will help them write strong letters to

the admissions committee, reinforce the themes you emphasize in your application packet, and make it more cohesive for the admissions committee.

## **2.7 TRANSCRIPTS & FINANCIAL AID**

### ***TRANSCRIPTS***

Graduate schools will require transcripts from prior educational institutions. The criteria for which transcripts will be required will vary by the university. Some graduate programs will require transcripts from *all* prior institutions, whereas others will only require them from institutions where a minimum number of credits have been completed. The omission of required transcripts is grounds for dismissal, so allow time for all requests to be processed and sent to your prospective schools. We recommend that you request transcripts one to two months in advance. This will give you time to re-request your transcripts should something go awry.

If you have attended an international university with non-English language transcripts, you will likely be required to submit a certified English translation. This will involve hiring an official translating service. You cannot certify the translation yourself. The processing time for certified transcripts varies by the service, so add that time into your estimates. Rushed translations can be expensive, so investigate this service early.

### ***FINANCIAL AID***

Several types of financial aid applications may be relevant to your application.

**FAFSA.** If you are a U.S. citizen, you can complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). You may think this should wait until acceptance. However, the FAFSA may be used by universities to demonstrate financial need for application fee waivers or by testing providers for exam fee reductions.

**APPLICATION FEE WAIVERS.** Another form of financial aid to consider is application fee waivers. Each university has its own procedures for demonstrating financial need for a waiver, so check with the university to identify the documentation you will need to compile and the deadlines for submission.

## 2.8 LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Most graduate schools require two to three letters of recommendation with your application. You should start the process of obtaining these letters at least one month before your application deadline. A month is enough time to ensure all your references are willing and able to write you letters of recommendation and find suitable alternatives if anyone is not.

To get the strongest recommendation letters possible, you will need to provide letter writers with supporting documentation. This is why it's important to start working on your application materials early. Ideally, your supporting documentation will include a cover letter, a copy of your CV, a work sample (if appropriate), and a copy of your admissions statement. It is fine to send materials that are still in draft form if they are free of typos and largely complete. Just inform them that the version is a draft.

Additionally, some references want you to write a draft letter of recommendation for them to tailor. When first contacting your prospective letter writers, ask if they want you to provide a draft version of a letter so that you are not surprised by another task to complete.

There are three stages to asking for letters of recommendation: Initial request, response, and letter writing (Table 8).

**Initial request.** One month before the earliest application deadline, contact your references to ask if they would be able to write you a **strong** letter of recommendation. If anyone declines, contact other potential references as soon as possible. If a potential reference does not respond after five days, follow up with them. Then, if the potential reference has not responded after four more days, move on to another potential reference.

**Response.** When someone agrees to be a letter writer, you have a decision to make. If your supporting materials (your CV, statement of purpose, research statement, etc.), are close to final, then you can respond immediately with the materials needed to write their letters.

However, if your supporting materials are not close to being final, respond to your letter writer with a promise to provide more details closer to the deadline and verify that the customary two weeks will be sufficient time for them to write the letter. If your letter writer needs more time to write the letter, you will need to send them whatever supporting materials you can to accommodate their schedule.

**Letter writing.** Two weeks before the deadline, send your supporting materials to your references if you have not already done so. Then, monitor your application portals for notification that the letters have been received by your program/s. Send reminders to any outstanding letter writers 7 days, 3 days, and 1 day before the deadline. After the hectic days

of submitting your applications are over, send a thank you message to your letter writers and remember to let them know when you are accepted.

TABLE 8. TIMELINE FOR REQUESTING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

| Stage          | Days Before the Application Deadline | Activity                      |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Request        | 30                                   | Initial inquiry               |
|                | 25                                   | Non-response follow-up        |
|                | 21                                   | New request if needed         |
|                | 16                                   | Non-response follow-up        |
| Respond        | 29 – 14                              | Reply to letter writers       |
| Letter Writing | 14                                   | Last day to deliver materials |
|                | 7                                    | Reminder                      |
|                | 3                                    | Reminder                      |
|                | 1                                    | Reminder                      |
|                | -1                                   | Send thank you letters        |

### 3. SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION

We recommend submitting your application a few days before the deadline because this will give you time to respond to any problems that may arise (e.g., power loss, internet outage, or application portal glitches). If possible, aim to submit your application 3 to 7 days before the official deadline for each program (even earlier is fine if you are ready).

We've developed the following checklist to help you avoid some commonly made mistakes when submitting your finalized application.

|                          | SUBMISSION CHECKLIST                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Verify all documents have the headings specified in the application guidelines.                                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Verify all documents meet the formatting criteria specified in the application guidelines.                                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Verify all documents have page numbers turned on.                                                                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Verify the correct university and program is named in each document it appears in.                                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | If you have named faculty members in your materials, verify the right faculty are named for the right program.                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Use a read-aloud function as one last check for typos in your materials.                                                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Ensure that file names contain your last name (unless instructed otherwise) and that the correct university is in the file name. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Double-check your details and contact information in each portal.                                                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Verify the correct file versions are matched with the correct application portal.                                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Verify you have answered all portal questions.                                                                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Verify that all test scores and transcripts have been received.                                                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Save all receipts and confirmation documents in each application folder.                                                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Send thank you letters to references.                                                                                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Prepare for interviews if applicable.                                                                                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Let your references know when you've been accepted.                                                                              |

We hope this planning guide clarifies the processes and preparation needed for graduate school applications. We hope you find it useful and wish you luck on your academic journey!

If you've found this guide helpful, check out our other materials at [Graduate Student Success](#), where we're dedicated to supporting graduate students every step of the way.